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ABSTRACT

This contrastive listing of the possibilities and problems of the language laboratory is intended for the elementary and secondary school teacher. In this article, the author emphasizes the oral nature of language and the need to treat methods, materials, and machinery as a trinity. (RL)

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THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS

December 1958

Statement of the Possibilities and Problems of the Foreign Language Laboratory

By A. BRUCE GAARDER

We are not here to talk about all that a foreign language department can and should do, but to discuss what a foreign language laboratory—or if you wish, the foreign language teaching machine—can do at exactly the points in our elementary and secondary school programs where it is most useful and where we are given leverage to use it. We could speak cautiously, developing the thesis point by point with all of the careful disclaimers and qualifying statements necessary to be safe at all times. Instead of that procedure, however, I prefer to leave the hedging and qualifying and disclaiming for that final document we shall produce for our ultimate audience—the teaching profession at large—and use this time for a few uncompromising statements of the possibilities and problems of the foreign language laboratory in the four years immediately ahead of us.

First, the Possibilities

No. 1. Language is what I am doing now. It is something on the fly, produced on the fly and caught on the fly. For learning purposes, for Title III purposes, it must not be confused with writing, the graphic representation of itself. Like music, it is sound, noise, which only exists by creation and constant recreation. The FL teaching machine provides a means of working with that sound on the fly. It is essentially a tireless, mechanical native tutor with which to experience and re-create the sound system which is language. It can provide endless experience with and control of the two basic language skills: understanding speech and speaking.

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No. 2. In the normal FL classroom, with twenty-five students and fifty minutes, if the teacher speaks the FL half of the time (as he probably should) each pupil has one minute left per day in which to perform. *Learning would be a miracle.* But with the FL teaching machine in the classroom, equipped with individual earphones for each pupil (and preferably with microphones for more acute self-audition) all of the class could work aloud actively and individually throughout the entire class period.

No. 3. An ordinary FL class must advance at one chosen rate and cover the same body of material. But by using *several* teaching ma-

chines *simultaneously* in the classroom, it is easy to accommodate different levels of individual capacity and rate of learning within a single class.

No. 4. We have already mentioned the analogy between language and music and will refer to it again later. FL teaching machines can make possible the *extra practice outside of class* without which neither the piano nor the violin nor golf nor a foreign language can be learned satisfactorily.

No. 5. Current educational research shows the extraordinary importance of reinforcing or rewarding a child's every response by confirming immediately the correctness of that response. Each unit of a series of responses should be thus confirmed immediately. The FL teaching machine can easily provide this reinforcing confirmation of correctness after each item.

No. 6. The order of the FL learning process, first understanding through the ear, then speaking, then reading and finally writing, calls for an initial period of training *without recourse to any visual or written forms.* The FL teaching machine at last makes it possible and easily practicable for this emphasis upon hearing and speaking to be *built into the course* by giving the student initial access to all new elements of the FL *through his ears only.*

No. 7. By synchronizing the tape player with a film projector, sound and picture can combine in a simultaneous, greatly reinforced presentation of the new FL elements to ear and eye together. This gives a stronger impression, facilitates memorization, and helps to shut the native English out of the mind.

No. 8. The FL teacher is already overburdened. His total task can be thought of as 6-fold: the initial presentation of new material, the explanation, the drill, the constant review, the engaging of his students in live oral performance in the FL, and the testing. All of these but one can be handled in large measure by the FL Lab. All of them except the most important one of all: engaging the students individually and chorally in live performance. Thus the FL Lab can *lighten* the teacher's load and give him more time for the most important task of all and the one that no machine can perform: *live oral performance by the students.*

No. 9. We have everywhere, at every level of teaching in this country, FL teachers who do not speak the language at all or whose skill is inadequate. If those teachers were provided with proper FL teaching machines and materials *for their own personal, private use,* they would have one excellent means of remedying the deficiency. They would, as it were, have a piano to practice on.

And Now, the Problems

No. 1. We have all heard the silly bit of folklore which avers that we Americans have no knack for learning FLs. That ridiculous notion has arisen because so many Americans have attended FL classes, done everything the teacher required, received good grades, yet *have not learned the foreign language*. The reason is that what they learned was so often not a foreign language at all, but a more or less erudite system of talking about the FL—in English. I have already said that foreign language is sound, noise, something that can be done over the telephone, or in the dark. In other words, insofar as Title III is concerned, it is a *skill,* not a body of content. It is not something one *learns*. It is something one learns *to do*.

Our first problem then is to provide for everyone, laymen, students, and teachers, a rule of thumb with which to judge whether a given foreign language teaching situation has built into it the likelihood of failure or the likelihood of success. This rule of thumb is provided *by the analogy with piano*. Both foreign language and piano are skills requiring similar techniques and amounts of practice. Many FL teachers have been like piano teachers whose students *talked about* piano playing throughout the class hour and had no piano to practice on at home. "He knows the piano well" means he *plays* the piano well. "He knows the language well" is self-deluding nonsense unless it means that he speaks-understands much of the language. In both cases *knowing* is *doing*.

Experimental school of the University of Kentucky (courtesy MRI)

No. 2. The second problem is to recognize that the 3 M's, methods, materials, and machinery, are an indivisible triunity. Each of these can be discussed separately, but in practice, in the classroom, they are an *indivisible* unit. The machinery can be purchased, but so far as the secondary school is concerned the proper teaching *materials* do not exist, and very few teachers have experience with the proper methods. Certainly each individual teacher cannot be expected to devise and produce his own. Therefore, much of the machinery purchased for high school use can be expected to do little more than gather dust unless steps are taken immediately to provide teaching materials designed specifically for integrated use with this equipment.

No. 3. We have said that the foreign language laboratory *can* provide that extra practice outside of class which is so necessary if either the piano or the foreign language is to be learned satisfactorily. Now the question is, how can students, administrators and parents be helped to realize this imperative need? And once it is realized, where is the practice to be done? In a study hall installation? In a library installation? Or can recordings (and even machines) be taken home for practice there?

No. 4. If we are to teach students to speak and understand the language, we must be prepared to examine them on those very skills periodically. Students will never learn to speak if they know the final examinations will test nothing but their ability to write. The point here is that adequate oral examinations— tests of speaking ability— for group use (examinations that are reasonably objective, easily administered and graded) do not exist. We must move immediately to provide them.

No. 5. How can we win the confidence and cooperation of our present foreign language teachers, many of whom are really English or history or science people who teach foreign language only as a marginal activity? How can we provide them sufficient demonstration and in-service training in the use of the new equipment and materials, *without its being an extra, uncompensated burden* on those teachers?

No. 6. Finally there are the easy problems: setting electro-mechanical standards and specifications to protect the teacher from the unscrupulous salesman; setting principles at the state level as a basis for approval of local applications for aid. The first five problems have been with us for years and will continue to plague us. The wisdom of all of you combined is needed for their solution.

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THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE LABORATORY

A Very Brief Summary of its Possibilities and Problems

The possibilities

1. The FL teaching machine is essentially a tireless native tutor, *a piano to practice on*, capable of providing endless experience with and control of the two basic language skills: aural comprehension and oral production.

2. It is *one way* to keep *all* of the class working aloud actively and individually with the stream of speech throughout the entire class period.

3. It will accommodate different levels of individual capacity and rate of learning within a single class.

4. It can provide the *extra practice outside of class* without which neither the piano nor golf nor a language can be learned satisfactorily.

5. It can reinforce learning immeasurably by providing immediate response confirmation (check on correctness) for each problem item.

6. It makes it possible and easily practicable to build the aural-oral emphasis into the course by providing the initial approach to all new language elements *through the ear only*.

7. By synchronizing the tape player with a film projector, sound and picture can combine in a simultaneous, greatly reinforced presentation of the new FL elements to ear and eye together.

8. Teaching machines can perform much of the teacher's work, leaving him more time for the *sine qua non*: engaging his students in live FL performance.

9. A private, portable FL machine with suitable materials provided for the personal use of the teacher can *over a period of years* teach the language to the teacher if he will do everything he tells his students to do.

The problems

1. The need for a widely-known rule of thumb (such as the analogy with learning the piano) which will enable laymen, students and teachers to predict the likelihood of failure or success of an FL teaching-learning situation.

2. Importance of considering the 3 M's (methods, materials, machinery) as an indivisible triunity no part of which can be treated separately. Machinery is easily purchased, but integrated materials designed specifically for high school FL Lab use *do not exist*.

3. How provide the extra, outside-of-class practice without which neither piano nor the FL can be learned satisfactorily?

   a. Study Hall lab installation?

   b. Library lab installation?

   c. Recorded materials (and machines?) for study at home?

4. Students will never learn to speak if they know the final examinations will test primarily their ability to write. How can we provide adequate (reasonably objective, easily administered and graded) oral examinations (tests of speaking ability) for group use?

5. How win the confidence and cooperation of our FL teachers? How provide sufficient demonstration and in-service training without it being an extra, uncompensated burden on those teachers?

6. Need to set standards and specifications (electro-mechanical and pedagogic).

   a. To protect the teacher from the unscrupulous salesman.

   b. To see that good equipment is used effectively.

7. How set principles for approval or disapproval of local applications for government aid?